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## It's all fun and games until someone loses an 'I': identity and the imaginary in playful academic development

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### ABSTRACT

“Once upon a time four very different women went into the Academy. They did not share a disciplinary homeland but forged new bonds closer than kinship and worked together for teaching to triumph over research. Things changed and, scattered to the four corners of the realm, they vowed to remain true to their playful hearts. Through missives, they storied, imagined, and strove to sing new worlds of wonderment into being.”

This paper chronicles their quest, tells of the old ways and the new, tells tales of beings and becomings, of how we make stories and stories make us.

We share our experience of academic development as inherently playful. We suggest that reflective practice, narratives of teaching philosophy and exploration of teaching identity engage academics with an exploration of their possible teaching selves. This potentiality is inherently fictional – we invite academics to dwell in imagined worlds, to imagine the possible, to exist in uncertainty, and initiate uncanny encounters. By engaging colleagues playfully, we can support them in pushing the boundaries of self and practice. This paper will embody an uncanny encounter, as we interrogated our work through letters exchanged and remixed to create imagined worlds and imaginary friends. A spirit of play brought a willingness to accept and embrace constraints, to try something difficult where success was not guaranteed. Extending playfulness into our methodology brought risk, challenge, and failure as we lost ourselves in fictional flow, until reflection-in-action restored us. We propose that this union between playful fiction and reflection can promise a happily ever after. Reader, should we marry them?

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## Introduction

Academic development is a relatively new field within higher education and one that has long experienced something of an identity crisis (Gosling, 2009). Characterised by contradiction, the institutional roles of academic development units are often caught within the cross hairs of managerialism and metrics (Bamber, 2020), whilst academic developers themselves more frequently try to articulate the work they do in terms of enhancement and enrichment (Peseta, 2014). Rather than regarding themselves as a mechanism through which extrinsic constantly mutating sector and institutional baselines and targets are met, the academic developer is intrinsically motivated by what they see as their role within the serious business of teaching and learning. Making its 'claims from the underside' (Miller, 1993) academic development constructs itself as values driven. It is high stakes. It is accredited. It is academic. It is reported. It is Important.

If, therefore, the place of playfulness in higher education is perceived to be problematic, the problem of playfulness in academic development must surely be wicked. Playfulness imperils the enterprise of academic development.

Or does it?

Is the greatest trick academic development has ever pulled off that of convincing the academic world of its seriousness? Has it always been fundamentally playful?

In this paper we will use the framework of playfulness as a signature pedagogy (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen & Whitton, 2017) to situate our project. Our aim was to reflect on the ways in which we, as academic developers, construct and negotiate our conflicting identities and what the implications of this identity construction might be for both our practice and that of others.

Having situated our project we will, playfully, lead the reader through our story. We built our narrative by exchanging letters. In our letters we reflected upon our practice and told tales of the old ways and the new, of beings and becomings, in order to surface how we make stories and how stories make us. We hoped that our storytelling would, as all good stories do, capture an underlying truth, perhaps seldom acknowledged, about the relationship between play and academic development. Through story we hoped to speak to a shared experience of play within the academy – and that like fables or fairy tales, readers would encounter the familiar within the strangeness of our fictionalised worlds.

We intended that the final section of this paper would provide the reader with insights on how they too might use this form of reflection-on-action as part of their practice. We planned to use the data to create a form of epistolary fiction – letters from our fictional doppelgängers – and to introduce our imaginary friends. We hoped

that introducing these fictional narratives would introduce an extra layer of playfulness to the process, giving the reader an insight into our exposed thoughts in a safe and creative way.

\*\*\*SPOILER ALERT\*\*\* that is not quite how this story ends...

### **Playfulness as a signature pedagogy and its relationship to academic development**

Nørgård et al. (2017) explore how the notion of playful learning in higher education can provide an alternative prism through which we can design curricula and learning activities. They argue that this approach can offer an antidote to the 'increasingly performative culture of higher education [that] creates an assessment-driven environment focused on goal-oriented behaviours (Ball, 2015), characterised by avoidance of risk and fear of failure' (Nørgård et al., p. 273). Drawing on the work of Shulman (2005) they outline how the framework of the three structures of a signature pedagogy could be articulated in relation to playfulness.

We want to revisit, for a moment, Shulman's seminal article. In introducing his concept of signature pedagogies, Shulman states:

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once observed that if you wish to understand a culture, study its nurseries. There is a similar principle for the understanding of professions: if you wish to understand why professions develop as they do, study their nurseries, in this case, their forms of professional preparation (p. 52).

If learning in higher education acts as a nursery to enculturate students into the disciplines and professions, then, we would argue, academic development provides the nursery for those who support that learning. Here we focus specifically on the development of pedagogies and teaching practice rather than academic skills more widely, as many of the people academic developers work with are highly experienced in other academic roles. Although the various programmes designed to support people in the early stages of their teaching careers are often the 'bread and butter' of academic development work, academic developers often support the design, development and implementation of innovative pedagogies, new modes of teaching, and curriculum design. Therefore, teachers may return regularly to academic development 'nurseries' across their careers.

The performative culture that Nørgård et al. (2017) argue adversely affects students' learning is also in evidence within teaching in higher education. From institutional student evaluations of teaching to the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), teaching and teachers are monitored, judged and either rewarded or sanctioned. It is perhaps then unsurprising that teachers can develop the same 'goal-oriented behaviours' that are 'characterised by avoidance of risk and fear of failure' (p. 273). As such, we would argue, playfulness can play the same role in our approach to the development of teachers as it

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does for students. It is this notion that underpinned the rationale for our project and this paper. We decided to use the framework of the three structures of playfulness as a signature pedagogy to excavate our own practice and identities and how this shapes our professional relationships, and it is to this that we now turn.

## **Playful academic development and us**

In this section we outline how our identities as academic developers relate to the implicit, deep and surface structures of the signature pedagogy framework, and how this shaped our project.

### *Implicit playful structures*

We would argue that education is situated, relational and complex. It involves humans and so is inherently instable, being reconstituted by each encounter, evading simplistic cause and effect analysis. Research can tell us the possible consequences of professional action within the classroom, but cannot determine with certainty what will work. This centres practice which is evidence-informed rather than evidence-based. As research can only tell us what has worked (or not worked) within a very specific past context we need to apply professional judgement to determine the best professional action.

The moral dimension at play here is that education is always values driven. We can only determine the most effective way to act by defining what we are trying to achieve, and by asking ‘effective for what?’ This means that teaching is always predicated upon our values as educators (Biesta, 2020). What are our goals? What are our aspirations for our students?

There is, when educating the educators, a doubling effect. Our aspiration for our learners is that they develop their ability to make complex professional judgements about practice, which in turn enable them to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome for students. This means analysing their context, recognising pedagogic decisions, and interrogating the decision-making process. Although there is foundational knowledge (learning theory, pedagogical models and frameworks, and information of what has worked in the past) the variable nature of teaching as a domain precludes simple application of evidence-based knowledge.

The stock in trade of academic development, ‘reflection-on-action’ (Schön, 1983), offers one lens through which practice can be retrospectively examined and the actions, beliefs and attitudes that created that practice interrogated. Reflection always looks back in order to move forward. This kind of reflection does not only increase one’s knowledge but also challenges the theories and concepts held by a person (Bolton, 2004). Critical reflection overlays the lens of research evidence to widen the dialogue – moving from the self-discourse of reflection to a collective interpretation of experience represented within the literature.

Underpinning reflective practice is a dissatisfaction with the status quo. This represents an intrinsic motivation (reminiscent of play) which is inspired not by pure 'fun' but by a restless desire for progress. The centrality of this desire to move forward creates an openness – to change, to critique, to risk and to failure. It leans in to the experience of others – reflection requires curiosity to see teaching from multiple perspectives, and an empathetic openness that listens in for learning. There is no one right answer, no single solution or interpretation for the myriad of possibilities and possible actions within classrooms.

We suggest then that academic development shares the implicit signature structures of play: democratic values and openness, acceptance of risk-taking and failure, and intrinsic motivation. Our practice is characterised by a lusory attitude that is central to our approach to academic development, and which constitutes a 'hidden curriculum' upon which the structures, deep and surface, of practice are constructed.

### *Deep play structures*

We (the authors) met in 2011 when we worked at the former Higher Education Academy (rebranded as Advance HE), which was a government funded national body to enhance the quality and impact of teaching and learning in UK higher education. Attached to broad disciplinary clusters, Social Sciences and Arts & Humanities, we were tasked with offering sector-wide support to develop teaching practice and teaching practitioners. Our events enabled colleagues to step out of departmental and institutional constraints and to enter a 'magic circle' of sorts, where the seriousness of education in the real world could be simultaneously suspended and maintained. We sought to surprise, to innovate and to delight, even to enchant. We designed simulations, semblances of reality – inventing temporary worlds resonant with the emotions and recollections of the 'real life' left behind. We invited colleagues into random real-life collaborations to think up radical interdisciplinarity – we took them to the moon! We used metaphor and poetry to symbolise lived experience in order to amplify the associations that usually lie beneath the surface, and which constitute the taken-for-granted backdrop of our teaching worlds.

All our activities and events (self-)consciously foregrounded play and playfulness as we led explorations of the possible in teaching practice. Separating academics from their day-to-day realities in order to make visible that which sits beneath, we conjured new 'realities' to create the conditions for transformational change. So, although our explorations were non-serious our play was 'very serious indeed' (Huizinga, 2016, p. 5).

The deep structure of our signature pedagogy assumes that understanding of teaching stems from one's ability to author an 'authentic' teaching identity. Teaching identity is both real and imagined, and an ability to narrate what is, what might be, and what should be within the rule-bound spaces of the academy. The development and articulation of teaching identities and teaching philosophies is enshrined and accredited by the reflective narrative, an autobiographical presentation of a teaching self, which is, like all autobiography a work of auto-

fiction.

We suggest that dwelling in and authoring these narratives is itself a form of play. Narrative creates a space where normal rules can be set aside, like the magic circle it has a permeable boundary – at once set apart and profoundly part of the world. It therefore enables simultaneous possibilities to co-exist. Like reflection it can look back whilst simultaneously looking forward. So, we perceive one aspect of our role as academic developers as creating and maintaining the magic circle of narrative. Narrative also reflects the inherent instability of teaching knowledge and the teaching self and centres the impossibility of ‘authenticity’. It resists the totalising force of ‘best practice’ – that there is one right way to be a teacher, and instead celebrates the multiplicity of voices and dimensions that we bring to our lives as teachers. It also, importantly, resists colonisation by the dominant discourses of academic development (Peseta, 2011).

So, true to the deep structure of our discipline, we wanted to create a narrative that reflected the way in which we construct ourselves and our practice, but which also enabled us to reconstitute ourselves as playful researchers. We wanted to imagine possibilities for (playful) action whilst reflecting on our actualities. We wanted to fictionalise our identities and by creating our narrative doppelgängers – those who look like us but aren’t us, to experience the uncanny surprise of seeing ‘our face in the crowd’. In this way – through our playful exploration, we would lose ourselves – but through losing ourselves glimpse versions of our alternative selves.

We began with a phase of discovery and exploration, drawing on our own individual disciplinary backgrounds and interests to consider play and its role in our work. We came together, enthusiastically exploring ludic learning, narrative inquiry, gamification, fiction and performance, the magic circle – discussing potential directions. Significantly, these conversations were very playful. Messy, but fun.

### *Surface game structures*

Having read Harris’ (2002) article on the correspondence method in qualitative research, we were all drawn to the idea of letter writing as a data collection approach. We are – always have been - geographically distributed (England, Scotland, and Australia) and our communications tend to be via social media or email, usually about immediate work questions/problems. Letter writing intrigued us as an old-fashioned and intimate form of communication that would challenge us to engage with each other (and our thought processes) in new ways. Letter writing engaged us in narrative building, but tangentially. The process of fiction writing is hard, requires discipline and structure. Letter writing offered a low barrier to entry – and was a version of our normal communication habits – but with a novel material dimension. The creation of a physical artefact (that didn’t admit cultural ready-mades gifs, emojis which mediated our regular digital communications) made our conversations uniquely ours. The pleasure of sending and receiving letters – those fat packets plopping through the letterbox – was highly engaging. As Gen Xers there was a certain Proustian resonance to this analogue

process that enhanced reflection.

The brief was loose to allow the data to flow and emerge; the only 'rule' was that it had to be handwritten, which foregrounded the process of writing and the way in which our narratives were constructed. We agreed to write two letters to each person: a total of 24 letters over four months.

These letters were to form a fictional work which replicated the identity work, the 'what goes on in the classroom', i.e. Shulman's surface level.

Having related our approach and identities to the framework for signature pedagogies we will now discuss how this played out in practice.

### **Losing, and then finding, our 'I's**

We could never have predicted the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit as we began to generate data. Two letters were lost in the closed vaults of university mail rooms and the international postal service slowed. For timeliness we sent photographed long-distance letters electronically, which retained an experience of handwritten text. The pandemic experience – which imposed extra demands on our work and home lives, changed the landscape of the project - inevitably became an integral part of our data, and of our stories.

Once all 24 letters were exchanged, we began the process of data analysis. We transcribed the letters and collated the data in a central file, including photographs of the original letters to capture the aesthetic elements (nice paper, doodles etc.). Each of us then analysed all 24 letters to identify emergent themes. Collation of our individual analyses resulted in 21 themes, which we cross-validated through a process of discussion.

Ultimately, we were able to agree on four dominant themes: reflection; resistance/liberation identity; and, agency. Our next step was to develop a fictional 'meta-letter' – built from actual extracts from the letters. Then, we composed four different responses to the meta-letter (again composed of quotes/extracts from the data), each written through the lens of one of the agreed four themes.

#### ***The meta-letter***

Dear Lexie

The thrill of receiving actual letters – and your beautiful paper with its buzzing bee was especially delightful. What did that bee mean I wonder? Is it their industrious nature that appealed? Or their striking colours (I am reminded of your delectable taste in shoes)? Or is it their ongoing search for the nectar of life?

It was lovely to picture you at peace in your garden, surrounded by nature and music, contemplating your last few weeks in corona madness and reflecting on what the implications might be. I was also on leave at the same time and having very similar thoughts. Fear that the really interesting projects that make me enjoy the job and that stretch my mind and help me meet colleagues beyond XXX will be gone.... And in its place will be hours of tedious 'supporting reluctant staff to do more online teaching'

(and realising if they don't actually get their heads into gear, they might not have a fucking job!!). You're right though, in that there is also a huge opportunity to have conversations with tens of hundreds of colleagues about how they engage their students, and how they use authentic assessment, and all the things we've persuaded a whole bunch of colleagues to do until now could actually reach a bigger group. Potential for transformation. Never mind the bees, we could be a plague of locusts!! Biblical even.

Whatever happens (and I share your caution) I think we will be changed and I think there is some really important reckoning that will happen in the sector about the purpose and value of higher education. Now, that is a conversation I welcome.

So to the question you pose at the end of your letter – how to bring together playfulness with being more provocative/subversive? You know, at this point I don't think there's much room for provocation. This is important I guess – we can't expect to get away with just being the party hosts all the time. There comes a point – as it should be – when someone asks 'what difference does it make?'

When I first started thinking like this a few weeks ago, a little bit of my spirit fizzled. Why do we have to spoil the fun, why can't we just accept things at face value? Why are universities so bloody bogged down in (mis)measurement mantra?

Speaking of something much more fun – how did your playful learning workshop go? We were always experts on 'the weird stuff' – which was our strength and ultimately our weakness. Quite hard to pitch to those of a more business persuasion and deeply lacking in imagination. Without people like us – a bit invested, determined and faithful in our own beliefs/knowledge/instincts - what a terrible time our academics would have! We have to be strong and confident and have just enough ego to convince 99% of the room we are worth following!! Is there a problem that we are held up to be experts, and then those who are told of our expertise then say 'prove it' [...] Can we expect them to just take us at our word?

My table squeaks as I write. A sort of rhythmic insistent squeaking.

I had a lovely email from someone this morning who had just heard that her promotion to full professor had been approved. Her email was a thank you for the support I'd given her over the years. Made me feel quite emotional.

So what have I done that makes this teacher want to thank me? Very little actually! When I reviewed the documents that she had compiled for her promotion, I was surprised to see one of her examples of innovative teaching name-checked me. I had helped her develop resources for a debate-style seminar. Not really what we would call 'innovative' but she had really loved the idea and apparently it had gone well.

So, back to the teacher newly promoted. The only other thing I can think of is that I did take the time to listen when she had some poor student evaluations. I have found this element - listening - of our work – so important here. It is quite extraordinary here how so many people have no-one to talk to about things going wrong. Failure just isn't something that is part of the culture.

But then I thought it's not so bad if you turn their game into a game. Part of our superpower is that we sit in the middle of the panopticon. We know the market forces, the tick box mentalities, the pressure points. Similarly, we know what's important to the academics. And of course, we know the mismatch.

Could there be some link there with our roles in Academic Development? We are always 'other' – travelling in from distant 'disciplinary' lands with strange language and culture and yet we are the same – despite our 'fervent urge' to change pedagogy, change learning and teaching, challenge our assumptions . . . We are still human. In fact, it's funny how much of the current discussion on moving



to online L&T is about 'being human'. I find that really difficult in any sense. What does that even mean?? Does that mean sharing humanity in an age when it is so undervalued? Does it mean exposing weaknesses and flaws? I'm getting particularly annoyed by the consensual hoorah soundbites that seem to earn endless praise and amplification on twitter.

I feel like I'm working in the dark a bit.

Right going to close now (run out of paper) – and also dinner time. We eat early – like children/old people and dogs. Aubergines and miso tonight. Meat free day. We both got fat in lockdown phase 1 so are now desperately trying to make calorific amends. For my part with little success!

Love, Ange

What came next was a critical moment in the project. Uneasy with the feeling that we didn't really understand what the reader would get out of these works of semi-fiction, we thought about how we could insert a layer of commentary – a voice to highlight and explore the relevance and meaning of the texts. We agreed to annotate our composed letters, imagining we were an educational researcher (perhaps in the future who had come across it in an archive). Again, we were trying to stay true to the playful elements, framing it with a story. It was hard.

This became a crisis point for the team. None of us felt the multiplicity of voices or the narrative framing worked. There was no plot. Verisimilitude was broken. Worse still, we didn't know how to fix it. We felt disorientated now our voices had become muddled and our identities confused. We had lost our 'I's. Emotions ran high – frustration, disappointment and despair. It did not feel playful at all.

Although reflection-on-action is a key aspect both of our work as academic developers and of our approach to this specific project, at this point we needed to switch our approach. We needed to think about what we were doing while we were doing it, reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). Reflection-in-action is typically stimulated by surprise, by something which puzzled the practitioner concerned (Greenwood, 1993). This approach could be exemplified as that moment when you are in the room, teaching/facilitating and you can see that what you are doing just isn't working for the learners. Most times it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how you know this – although there are of course occasions when the learners articulate this to you very clearly! The key here, however, is rather than persisting with the same approach and pledging to reflect on it later and make changes, you have both the confidence and skills to adopt a different approach in the moment.

We found a way through. We decided to go back a step keeping our selected theme, removing the 'rules' we had previously imposed. We used the meta-letter as a starting point, to produce 'something' that discussed or explored the theme. This was a risk. We were opening up the potential for more chaos. In the 'somethings' that emerged, however, we could clearly see how we went back to our 'stock-in-trade' and designed artefacts that could provoke others to think, playfully, about teaching and learning.

We came back to our 'I's.

## The provocations<sup>1</sup>

What follows are the ‘somethings’ which we frame as four separate provocations to your own reflective practice. We invite you into our magic circle, to come and play in our storied worlds, and hope that you see something unexpected, unimagined, and perhaps even unsettling in the fictions we have created. After each imagining we pose questions which you might use to frame your encounter.

### *Provocation from Bee: invitation to tender.*

The first provocation evokes an academia transformed by ‘the great reckoning’. So naming the event assumes a commonly understood and shared reference point for this period in higher education’s history – tempting readers to speculate what might become after the pandemic and its fallout. That this is research-worthy indicates the scale and impact of the disruption, and theme suggests what the nature of that disruption might be: Agency.

Although the invitation to tender is imaginary, the themes summarised have emerged from the letters exchanged between the authors. They are, in this sense, real. We invite you to use the questions posed in each of the themes in the invitation to tender as prompts for reflecting on your own practice. If you don’t work in academic development, you can relate the prompts to the relationships you experience within your teaching and learning context.

#### *Invitation to tender*

A key initiative for the next academic year (2030/31) will be the staging of a major retrospective ‘Ten years on from the great reckoning: what really happened?’ The aim is to draw on insights from across the university in order to develop our next institution-wide strategy *Higher Education 2040: Not as confident as we used to be*.

A number of themes will be announced over the coming months (on dates yet to be decided but please be prepared for them to be announced at short notice), but our opening theme is ‘Agency’. This theme would include:

- having agency
- not having agency
- is agency an object i.e. can it be had?
- does it really matter if we are not entirely sure what agency means?

The theme draws on debates and discussions, both epistemological and ontological, concerning the status of agency that have circulated throughout many disciplines across the years. These debates were brought into harsh relief during the reckoning, and have continued to be a key source of tension between different parties within the sector. As ‘taken-for-granted’ ways of living, learning, knowing and acting have all been disrupted by forces outside the control of those previously seen to be powerful, debates have grown more

heated and positions more polarised.

The university archive has recently acquired a collection of letters that were exchanged between four academic developers that provide a unique insight into the changes taking place in education during the reckoning. Starting during the first of the springtime online pivots, and continuing through the many fluctuations in modes of learning and teaching that followed, these letters are sometimes irreverent, often meticulously detailed but always unflinchingly candid. University archivists have completed a preliminary analysis of the correspondence and you are invited to submit proposals to explore further the following themes:

- What is the nature of the relationship between academic development (and academic developers) and teaching? Where does the agency lie? Should academic developers use their skills to deliver the changes in practice requested by institutional leadership and/or teachers, however ill-conceived, or is part of their role to resist and subvert? What is the role of the student in these relationships?
- Can agency only ever be displayed through demonstrations of overt power? Is there such a thing as 'soft agency'? If the latter, is this a tendency that often characterises academic development, and what role does it play in shaping teaching and learning?
- Is academic development a field that is inherently formed by kindness? Here we define kindness, as one of the correspondents states, 'not in a fluffy slogan t-shirt flabby thinking way – all wholemeal tights and wooden earrings – but an intellectual curiosity in The Relational – the way that people operate – which creates inherently decent behaviours?'
- Can playfulness be an agent for change during times of upheaval? Can it help overcome feelings of 'grumpy lethargy' that are almost inevitable after a period of forced change such as that experienced during the first springtime online pivot? Is it possible, or even desirable, when working with 'a tough crowd' for academic developers to deploy 'some risky brashness' to encourage them to be playful?

The themes above are only an indication of possible areas for further exploration. Interested parties are invited to examine the letters in more detail if they wish to develop their own themes. In line with university policy, expressions of interest in the form of a written proposal (700 words); a collage (mixed-medium); a five minute film drawing on the Scandi-noir genre; or, a two-minute interpretative dance are all acceptable.

### ***Provocation from Pod: reimagined job application***

The aim of this artefact is to explore and challenge the notion that reflective practice – a central tenet of our work as educational developers – can or should be understood simply through the lens of 'emotion and care work' (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017). This article was debated within the letters and has been used here to construct a fictional set of selection criteria for an academic development role. The applicant's notes are formed from extracts from the letters themselves. The aim is to playfully reveal a more authentic picture of reflection and reflective practice, moving beyond the traditional (feminine) notions of nurturing or counselling.

| Criteria  | Re-imagined response  |
|---|---|
| <p>Demonstrate a <b>Service Oriented Approach</b></p>   | <p>I have a deep professional altruism which is evidenced throughout my work with individuals and teams – staff and students are at the core of my values.</p> <p>I believe that staff and the university are entitled to ask what a difference my work makes, <b>but</b> that this should not stifle my ability to experiment and be creative in my work.</p> <p>I accept that a lot of my work is tedious and I will not always be recognised for it; I do, however, get deep satisfaction from academics who thank me for my contribution/support.</p> <p>Reflective practice underpins my service approach – good teaching depends on it. Anyone who does not subscribe to it should be challenged.</p> |
| <p>Ability to create <b>warm, safe environments</b> which help teachers to reflect</p>                    | <p>Reflection needs a ‘safety catch’ – a mechanism which allows our ‘real self’ to escape to enable a disembodied low/no stakes Top Trumps process to kick in. I develop ‘arm's length’ activities to make reflection safe.</p> <p>I effectively pitch playful spaces to those of a more ‘business persuasion’ or who are deeply lacking in imagination.</p> <p>I see imagination as a playful space, but it is also where our deepest, darkest fears lurk. In order to make staff feel safe in these spaces, I use tools like metaphor and fiction; these allow staff to construct stories which, although useful, are most probably false/lies.</p>   |
| <p><b>Empathetic skills</b> and a <b>sensitivity</b> to the demands on academics</p>                      | <p>I believe that educational development has a mode of being/values/behaviours which is not shared by wider academia - there is something about our field which is inherently formed by kindness. Academics can be insecure, unpleasant and mean – and sometimes they offend and upset me.</p> <p>Academic staff do not always feel they have someone who listens, especially when something is going wrong. I enjoy taking that role - it surprises me sometimes how grateful staff are for what seems to me to be a rather simple contribution/suggestion. What I see as simple problem solving, is often perceived/received as nurturing.</p>   |
| <p>Ability to <b>build relationships</b> and navigate intimate, emotional encounters with individuals</p> | <p>As an educational developer, I have an intellectual curiosity in the Relational – the way that people operate – which creates inherently decent behaviour.</p> <p>However, at times my patience is tried, especially where over-confident, egotistical staff are involved. I cleverly use my ‘professional mask’ to deal with these situations. Where they enrage or disgust me, I am able to hide my emotions well; yet this affects me deeply as an ethical practitioner and advocate.</p>   |
| <p>Ability to help staff reflect through <b>deep listening</b> and <b>powerful question asking</b></p>    | <p>My approach to helping staff tell their stories is described by colleagues as ‘entrepreneurial’. I have, for example, made podcasts, which although are poor quality, have had an impact on everyone involved.</p> <p>I enjoy the process of pulling out a story – it is like a drug and I buzz when a little ‘nugget’ jumps out that no one was expecting. I also enjoy</p>   |

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|   | poking staff to encourage them to be brave and rebellious – for example to challenge the legitimacy/power of teaching surveys.   |
| <b>Guide</b> staff through zones marked by uncertainty and ambiguity  | I often liken myself to Dr Who. I take my companions through time to revisit past experiences, seeing their worlds through the eye of an ‘objective observer’. This is often a scary place; sometimes I must be reckless.  |
| Ability to work <b>collaboratively</b> with key stakeholders in accreditation processes and instructional design. | I have an issue with reflection when performed purely for accreditation or assessment. It becomes a process that edits and crunches out all the interesting (maybe messy) creative stuff.<br><br>We all have a ‘comms version’ of ourselves and the university systems encourage us to use these. Working with stakeholders I am constantly dancing around questions of who decides what is good enough, what informs that and who sets the standards? |
| Scholarly/research ambition   | I would like to conduct research to explore how staff experience ‘epiphany moments’ during the self-reflection process. I will, of course, need to pursue this in my own time.   |

Are you shocked by the language or points made? Would you recognise these as skills/qualities that should be acknowledged and revealed or flaws which should remain hidden? Does it change how you conceive and articulate your own teaching and learning practice?

### ***Provocation from Bond: data analysis***

The aim of this annotated letter extract by an imaginary future educational researcher was an attempt to fictionalise our approach. This provocation attempts to decontextualise and almost deconstruct the tone and language of a hybrid letter – the bastardised creation of all four voices merged and spliced into one. Having truly lost a singular voice, this provocation wanted to then fictionalise our methodology. Reflecting on this process, as our signature pedagogy required, became less of a desire to locate the ‘I’ and more about looking for an alternative ‘eye’. What would we (as a community of educational developers) make of the ‘data’ we had created? What emerged seemed to be parody instead - flippant and yet enormously pleasurable to write.

*Dear Ange,*

*It also feels apt that I’m writing this on 14 July, the liberation day in France. Gosh, it is surprisingly hard to write by hand – I miss letters. I feel incoherent, clumsy. So bear with me!*

*I love the way you described that feeling of being simultaneously more and less like yourself in this period. It sums it up perfectly. That’s what I love about being somewhere else – you are ‘other’ and can somehow be more true to yourself; liberated from the constraints of people’s expectations, but you are also alien and unknown in a different context.*

Interesting to note the word ‘liberation’ appearing twice here marking both time and space. There is a sense of exploration, of searching for something and I wonder whether the letter form is in itself part of this process. The use of the words ‘incoherent, clumsy’ emphasise this feeling of blundering around in the dark, looking for something... I also wonder how much the ‘alien and unknown’ are also part of the art of letter writing. Are they writing to find meaning? Or is it the process of writing that will shape the meaning?

*It's so lovely to picture you ensconced in a cosy space with biscuits and unusual tea. I write this having ducked out of a meeting. I'm feeling quite weary – having just had several days' worth of conflict with my teenaged son. I want to lure myself into thinking and writing and quite frankly, a meeting just will not do. A huge benefit to working online is the simplicity of being able to just not turn up!*

- I am finding the ongoing 'love' and 'lovely' tiresome; however it does imply a real warmth and friendship between the correspondents. Perhaps this is why they are able to be so open about their incoherence and explorations – they don't seem to be vulnerable or exposed as you might expect in professional relationships. Especially ones that took place amidst the global divisions and hatred that were so powerful at that time in history.
- It is funny to think about how new they obviously were to online learning and teaching in this period. And also that they still have meetings – the frequency and popularity of which started waning around 2030 after the famous study led by Bovill & Flint (2029) who found that students felt increasingly invisible in the meeting process and demanded a place for every student at every institutional meeting. I do remember, as a student myself then, the Great Student Boycott of discussion boards and the fear of senior managers who then decided it was better to abolish meetings than allow students in to every one. There also wouldn't have been enough money for all the coffees and biscuits (in the days before we started eating dried locusts in our protein juices).
- The other thing that strikes me here is the juggling alluded to here between caring responsibilities and work and how those tensions led to a need to prioritise carefully. In fact, it is hard to imagine how female dominated the Academic Development sector was in those days. Now it is a very male profession (ever since the increase in prestige for teaching in the mid-2020s).

*The point of this letter is not to share my dislike but to unearth a truth about teaching that is rarely voiced aloud. I knew, fundamentally, that my reaction here said much more about my own assumptions and prejudices than it did anything else. My response was a timely reminder that, yes, I am human but also I am a middle-aged woman and I am so sick and tired of men my own age (and older) patronising me to try and cover their own inadequacies.*

Note to explore further – why the rage? I actually think this person has a point and there seems to be a contradiction here between the discussion of teaching as performance in the paragraph preceding this anecdote, the 'mask' described here. Do you need a 'mask to teach'? I also think there's something here about the professionalism of this male colleague being questioned when the correspondent's own description here is very far from professional...

Through the act of weaving different voices together into one, a new version is created. At what point did the fiction begin? If we translate this playful blurring between subjectivity and objectivity, we once again get to the heart of reflective practice. When you write an account of your teaching practice, whether that be through a letter or a fellowship application, or an essay for a postgraduate certificate in higher education, at what point does this representation become fiction? When you assess those pieces as an academic developer, at what point does your feedback become objective?

### ***Provocation from Crane: messages exchanged via WhatsApp, March - July 2020***

This provocation mimics a group chat between the friends, conducted via a social messaging app. The letters are edited and remixed to concentrate the themes of identity, otherness and estrangement within the academy. It tells the story though one of Bookers' (2004) seven basic plots – The Quest – to evoke the call to adventure in

response to a threat to existence as it is known, the companions, the ordeals of the journey, a final ordeal at the point of return, and the achievement of a life renewing goal – the traditional happy ending.

*Angels chat*

*Bee, Bond, Pod, you*

*Bond*

Dreich and gloomy morning.

Seriously beginning to feel the weight of lockdown. Fear that the really interesting projects that make me enjoy the job and that stretch my mind will be gone.... And in its place will be hours of tedious ‘supporting reluctant staff to do more online teaching’.

We have cancelled our fun stuff, just workshops on how to do this, that and the other online.

*Pod*

Same. Conference gone. No headspace to think about pivoting to virtual playfulness.

*Bee*

I was working on some really exciting projects, but no more playfulness and where will that leave us?

Determined to keep some disruptive ‘WTF?’ stuff.

*Pod*

Maybe real life is already sufficiently disrupted?

Maybe . . .

*Bond*

I think we will be changed.

*Bee*

Oh no! I love our ‘experts in weird shit’ identity.

I wish we could stay there.

*Bond*

The one constant I can rely on – and have done for years now – is our group of Angels. All flawed but still magnificent.

Camaraderie in adversity

*Bond*

I know for a fact I would not be doing what I do without you.

*Pod*

I was playing Top Trumps yesterday (btw Top Trumps – English phenomenon - who knew?) and I wondered if you could make top trump cards of our different self-presentations.

OMG imagine!

*Pod*

The Crane cards would definitely have a 'storm out of the room' one LOL

*Bond*

Pod would be playful banter

*Pod*

And playing devil's advocate.

*Bee*

Don't forget passive aggressiveness!

Our superpower!

What's Bee?

*Bee*

Rage? Rudeness?

*Bond*

Delectable shoes?

*Pod*

Confidence!

Yes!

*Bee*

<3

*Bond*

I miss holidays, the feeling of being somewhere else – where you are 'other' but somehow more true to yourself, liberated from expectations, alien and unknown.

Maybe ADs are always 'other' – travelling in from distant 'disciplinary' lands with strange language and culture and yet the same.

Peddling pedagogic snake oil?

*Pod*

Speaking of being 'othered' . . . help me make sense of this. I've just been axed from a project on the grounds that I am not a professor. Or a 'proper' academic.

???!?

*Pod*

It was an ambush. Prof 1 was apparently supposed to 'explain' beforehand, but for whatever reason had



not.

Prof 2 thought it was appropriate to attack my profile, my role and my academic identity in front of everyone.

How is that OK???

*Pod*

I just sat there. And they carried on as though I wasn't even there.

*Bond*

I'm shocked. That's bullying, or discrimination?

*Bee*

Academia is just nasty.

And het up with hierarchies.

*Pod*

I don't know what it is. God I was furious.

*Bond*

Sending enchantment across the ocean xxx

*Bee*

Playfulness end-of-year party fully booked! My next task is to figure out how to run it online.

*Pod*

Maybe this is the plot twist which occasions the triumphant return?

*Pod*

Scientists and Engineers are a tough crowd . . .

*Bee*

I have your voice buzzing in my ear: "But what's their takeaway. There has to be a takeaway!"

*Pod*

There does come a point – as it should be – when someone asks 'what difference does it make?'

*Bond*

I wonder if we \*are\* rebels, mavericks, boundary pushers? Or just swept up with our own self-indulgent playfulness?

*Bee*

I think that's the curious tension. On the one hand we are confident in our own experience and ideas, but on the other we are deeply insecure about the authority/currency our work has. . . .

Yes!

*Pod*

I actually feel like I may have 'play fatigue'! Since March it has been jumping from one idea to the next – this sounds fun, let's give it a go and see if it sticks. It mainly stuck. But the climate's changed. The players – the academics are tired and I sense a little bit lost.

*Pod*

I think we're all wondering where we will get the energy from to do another push. Maybe it's time to consolidate and embed.

*Bee*

Oh God! Embed! LOL

It all feels a bit flat.

*Pod*

Unusually grey and gloomy here, there's something about darkness in summer that chills the soul.

This isn't the triumphant end of Star Wars given a medal victory we were looking for.

*Bee*

Maybe the sunlight is still on the distant hill?

Hey. How's everyone doing?

*Pod*

Good! Simulation SIG gaining momentum. It's the element of play/games but still serious – or at least not trivial.

*Bee*

It's taken some risky brashness to get my lot to be playful. But now it's a genuine community of practice and I love that. It's organic, inclusive, accessible and playful – and that last bit has been crucial to its success.

*Bond*

Like a beautiful garden surrounded by roses.

Playfulness having an impact!

*Bee*

Sitting here in the garden listening to birdsong ... roses are just starting to bloom.

*Pod*

Happy summer's evenings abound.

And we all lived happily ever after.

How does play and playfulness create your story? Does this representation of camaraderie, conflict, and crises of confidence resonate with your experiences of the Academy? What or who is your 'monster'?

## Conclusion

We would like our own happily-ever-after ending to this story, a tale that was born from the playful conversations of a group of former colleagues in an attempt to create a methodology that liberated us from professional norms and expectations through an epistolary exchange. We were looking for an ‘uncanny encounter’ and we got a global pandemic and learning and teaching challenges that certainly reshaped our worlds.

In this article we have argued that there are clear links between playfulness as a signature pedagogy and the role that academic developers play in learning and teaching. Drawing on strategies of reflection-on-action and then reflection-in-action we have taken the readers through our process of analysing and sharing our practice, and then challenged readers to examine their own practice using the provocations that we designed.

The old rules are shifting. The future is uncertain but the stories we tell here suggest that drawing on our signature pedagogy in academic development, our reflection-on/in-action, is powerful, particularly when this reflection takes place as a collaborative process. As such, we intend to continue exchanging letters across the new academic year – a year that promises to be unlike anything we have experienced to date. We also plan to explore further ways in which to engage others in diverse and playful approaches to reflective practice,

We believe there is something liberating in representing our professional selves to the people we trust. Through this process, we identified the different voices and multiple teaching selves each individual inhabited. The elusive and illusory nature of ‘losing our I’s has helped us see again. We hope to develop strategies and processes through which others might be able to do the same.

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## Endnote

1. We have pseudonymised our work according to the motifs which graced the notepaper upon which we wrote our letters. (Bond used plain paper embellished only with the manufacturer's watermark.)